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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004100

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SUBJECT: TWO EDITORS AGREE: UNCERTAIN SUCCESSION IS
KUWAIT'S MOST PRESSING PROBLEM

REF: KUWAIT 03580

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: In courtesy calls by Ambassador LeBaron on the editors of Kuwait's top two Arabic-language dailies, each editor cited Kuwait's uncertain ruling family succession as the number one problem now facing the nation. The two papers, Al-Qabas and Al-Rai Al-Aam, differ significantly in tone and slant. And each editor's opinion on Kuwait's other pressing problems differed widely. But both men independently agreed that uncertainty surrounding royal succession, especially if de facto ruler Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah were to die, poses the most immediate danger to Kuwait's continued stability and prosperity. The ailing health of Kuwait's leadership continues to be a popular topic of conversation. Post contacts often mention that PM Shaykh Sabah is the same age as the frail Amir and the unstable Crown Prince, and comment that his reign would likely be short, but this is the first time anyone we have heard this degree of concern about his health. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

"Who Would Run the Country?"

2. (C) Walid Al-Nesf, editor-in-chief of Al-Qabas, the paper of record for Kuwait's liberal academics and intellectuals, took a broad view of Kuwait's place in the world, citing Iraq's prospects for stability and Iran's nuclear weapons program as Kuwait's most pressing problems outside of the succession issue. But he was clear on what troubled him the most: "If Shaykh Sabah died, who would run the country? Is this not a problem?" Jassem Boodai, whose top-selling Al-Rai Al-Aam newspaper favors sensationalist coverage of world events and hosts columns by some of Kuwait's most extreme Islamist voices, was more parochial in his view of Kuwait's problems, but he arrived at the same conclusion. Boodai said that he feared the destabilizing effects on Kuwait if turmoil in Saudi Arabia caused large numbers of Saudis from tribes such as the Mutairis and the Otaibis, large numbers of whom also live in Kuwait, to migrate to Kuwait. He also lamented the large U.S. presence in Kuwait and the sense of dependence it engendered among Kuwaitis. But these were minor issues compared to succession, he said: "Who is after Shaykh Sabah? It's a big problem."

"A Long Time to Build, Easy to Bring Down"

3. (C) Both men conceded that the uncertainty was good for the newspaper business, and that printing periodic public statements from representatives of the various competing royal factions sold papers. But both seemed genuinely concerned at what the death of PM Shaykh Sabah, who is 75 and has a pacemaker, might mean for Kuwait's continued stability. Boodai, who is close to the prime minister, who he referred to as "close to expiring," was more expansive in his uncertainty. Referring to Kuwait's democratic development since Sabah the First was appointed Amir of what is now Kuwait in the eighteenth century, he said, "It takes a long time to build, but it's easy to bring down. Kuwait is too small, too fragile, to handle an internal problem."

4. (C) Boodai referred to the various possible candidates for the crown, including Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, head of the National Guard, and Shaykh Hamed Al-Sabah, the Prime Minister's son, as horses lined up in boxes at the start of a horse race, and warned of the damage an unfair race -- "one trying to topple this guy, and topple that guy" -- could have on the nation. He then compared the turmoil of such a contested succession to a heart attack. There was a small chance that the patient might survive, he said, but even if he did, there was likely to be physical and psychological damage.

Al-Sabahs are Bad for Business

5. (C) Both men also spoke more broadly about the ruling family, and each sounded a similar note on the role of the royals in the commercial sector. "They should stay out of

banking," Al-Nesf said, suggesting instead that the Al-Sabah focus on real estate. He cited royal ties to what he described as two of Kuwait's less successful banks, Commercial Bank and Burgan Bank, and said that a banking business was too difficult to run while simultaneously running a country.

16. (C) Boodai was less charitable. Citing the pact agreed upon when the Al-Sabah were appointed rulers, that they would rule and leave commerce to the merchant families, he warned, "some (Al-Sabah) are crossing the line." He cited Shaykh Hamed Al-Sabah as "the worst of the worst," and called his usage of family ties to help his business prospects "unfair." (Note: Boodai is a member of one of the prominent merchant families presumably edged out when the Al-Sabah make forays into business. End Note.)

LEBARON